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Collaboration Makes More Lights Come on than Those on the Runway: Experiential Learning through an Interdisciplinary Fashion Show Project Merges Fashion and Technology

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Introduction

Jones, 2009 states the following:

The interdisciplinary approach is uniquely different from a multidisciplinary approach, which is the teaching of topics from more than one discipline in parallel to the other, nor is it a cross-disciplinary approach, where one discipline is crossed with the subject matter of another. Interdisciplinary techniques go beyond these two techniques by allowing students to see different perspectives, work in groups, and make the synthesizing of disciplines the ultimate goal.” (p. 76).

A study of universities with high research productivity found that those institutions actively encourage and foster interdisciplinary work (Harris, 2010). They prioritize collaboration in both teaching and research. Based on these ideas, the objective of this project was to encourage interdisciplinary cooperation of students to increase communication and creative problem-solving skills.

Inspired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibit, *Manus x Machina: Fashion in an Age of Technology*, in May 2016, the idea for the theme *Futuristic Floral* was born to guide the direction of the Apparel Merchandising and Product Development (AMPD) fashion show. In only the second year of production, we wanted to make sure that the show would entertain the audience and be a professional production. However, as educators, our primary goal was to make a lasting impact on the education of our students. Although we currently are one month from show time, we are already achieving our goals. This project has pushed our students to think, act, communicate, and create on a level that would not have been possible without the interaction of students from apparel and electrical engineering. The true impact for all students involved remains to be seen when the lights go down after the show and they realize they have been a part of something much bigger than they could create on their own.

History

The first public fashion show for our students was to a limited audience of 250 students, faculty, and alumni in the spring of 2015. The idea to make the show bigger and better, like a New York style show, was introduced to the apparel department that August. The show in spring 2016 was presented to an audience of over 500 spectators who raved about the designs. Student reviews of the project were overwhelmingly positive. Course evaluations included statements such as, “I liked that we got to develop the ideas for the show as we also developed our personal garments. It made me feel like I had a part in this big event” and “I feel like we

were challenged in this course throughout the semester to recall what we've learned from the program and think more ourselves to problem-solve and create our garment." These comments attest to the impact of the fashion show project itself. The added element of the collaboration is silently encouraging students from all areas involved to think outside of their discipline.

Development

The interdisciplinary portion of the project was the melding of an Electrical Engineering (EE) Senior Design Project with the fashion show. Once details of how to incorporate a year-long project for engineering students with two semester-long apparel projects were decided, a one-semester floral design project for horticulture students was added. The addition of 3D printers was another element added in the apparel program that increased technological aptitude and confidence for the garment designers. Apparel students started by creating inspiration boards and garment designs that fit the fashion show theme. These boards were then presented to the EE students and they began brainstorming. The EE students added runway lighting, sensors, and interaction between the garments and runway to the overall plan for the show. Each group then went to work creating their individual parts, but constant communication and progress meetings were necessary. When the models take the stage on the night of the show, not only will the audience see garments made by apparel students, but some will feature 3D printed embellishments and lights added by the EE students. Light emitting diode (LED) lights will line the runway and interact with the lights on the garments. A giant floral display designed and produced by horticulture students will add a festive atmosphere and give them a platform to display their creative work, as well. The whole show will be a collaborative effort not possible without the interdisciplinary cooperation of all.

Outcomes

Students from the first semester apparel course involved in the collaborative project have reported a very positive reaction. Some reported being surprised at how much adding technology to their projects has increased their creative confidence. Another student said, "The collaboration with electrical engineering students provided both departments with a taste of cross-functional teamwork that is so common between departments in the apparel industry today. I think they are elevating our show with some "wow" moments that will show how well fashion and technology can merge." The true test for the students will be the night of the show when their creativity comes to life. For the faculty involved, the goals have already been achieved.

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